

A Geneticist on Safeguards

To the Editor:

In a Feb. 28 news story I was quoted as having been in partial dissent from the Conference on Genetic Engineering at Asilomar, Calif., i.e., that I "regarded the safeguards as virtually unenforceable because of the difficulty of determining exactly the risk of specific experiments."

The subject of the conference and the implications of its conclusions are both extremely complex, and it would be easy and mischievous to oversimplify them; and the consequences for the progress of scientific research might then be very serious. Therefore I am bound to say that my own view is almost the opposite of what was asserted.

My chief concern at the conference was that a set of precautions that are entirely appropriate for certain risks might be prematurely rigidified into a set of bureaucratic regulations that might be very readily enforced beyond the domain of their reasonable application. I am wholeheartedly in support of the spirit and intentions of the conference report but was unwilling to put my name to a document that left many important questions for future determination and whose tone seemed to invite the bureaucratic rigidity just mentioned.

I was simply less optimistic than many of my colleagues that we would

have further opportunities to communicate the detail of a responsive set of regulations that would reflect more precisely than does the actual text of the provisional report the actual technical consensus of the group, which was indeed of a high order.

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